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## ► To cite this version:

Mickaël Naulleau. Conditions for developing a successful Talent Management Strategy. 4th Workshop on Talent Management, European Institute for Advanced Studies in Management (EIASM), Sep 2015, Valencia, Spain. hal-01221228

**HAL Id: hal-01221228**

**<https://audencia.hal.science/hal-01221228>**

Submitted on 2 Nov 2015

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# Conditions for developing a successful Talent Management Strategy

Mickaël Naulleau

## INTRODUCTION

Talent Management (TM) knows a large success since the famous announcement of McKinsey on 'War for Talent' (Michaels *et al.*, 2001). Attracting, recruiting, developing or retaining talented people represent a major practical HR challenge for sustainable competitiveness of many organizations all over the world (Lewis and Heckman, 2006). From an academic point of view, the ongoing growing number of studies on TM shows that this success also spreads into the research area (Dries, 2013 ; Nijs *et al.*, 2014).

The literature on TM consists of three main research themes (Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013). The first consists in defining the concept of talent and leads many authors to regret a lack of clear and consistent definition (Al Ariss *et al.*, 2014 ; Cappelli and Keller, 2014 ; Lewis and Heckman, 2006 ; Nijs *et al.*, 2014 ; Vaiman *et al.*, 2012) as well as empirical fragility of its conceptual framework (Collings and Mellahi, 2009 ; Lewis and Heckman, 2006). The second focuses on expected results of TM in terms of motivation, commitment, trust or individual well-being, or in terms of performance or organizational competitiveness (Cappelli, 2008 ; Collings and Mellahi, 2009). The third focuses on the TM processes, i.e. the set of practices developed by organizations in order to attract, develop and retain talented people (Cappelli and Keller, 2014 ; Stahl *et al.*, 2012).

Because these themes are mainly influenced by the Anglo-Saxon context and rather based on multinational-companies case studies (Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013), several researchers suggest that these perspectives and traditions may be counterbalanced by new ones in order to enrich theoretical knowledge on TM which are regarded as being at the age of

‘adolescence’ (Collings *et al.*, 2011 ; Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013 ; Vaiman and Collings, 2013). According to this recommendation, the paper presents the research carried out with a middle-sized French company (2,800 employees). More precisely, we seek to contribute to the third theme on TM processes by illustrating how TM is developed and implemented in this specific context.

This perspective is related to Strategic Talent Management (STM), i.e. a practical-oriented framework which is rooted in principles of strategy, economy and human resources (Collings and Mellahi, 2009 ; Lewis and Heckman, 2006). In this research stream, some authors developed an approach called ‘talentship’ (Boudreau and Ramstad, 2004 ; Lewis and Heckman, 2006) that contributes ‘to increase the success of the organization by improving decisions that depend or impact the talent resources’ (Boudreau and Ramstad, 2007, p. 25). Despite talentship provides an useful decision model for helping practitioners in structuring their TM strategy, we consider two limitations: on the one hand, talentship supposes an exclusive TM alignment on organizational strategy, and on the other hand, it implicitly suggests a capacity for every organization to implement TM strategy (Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013).

This paper therefore consists in investigating antecedents of TM implementation process. It focuses on the developing process of TM strategy which is surprisingly understudied in TM and STM literature. According to us, this investigation can contribute to better understand necessary conditions for a successful developing TM strategy (Joyce and Slocum, 2012) by enlightening situational and individual factors which influence this process, and answering to the following research question: **what are the organizational contingency’s factors involved into the developing process of TM strategy?**

Because of emerging nature of this theoretical perspective, we used an inductive and exploratory research method. The research was initiated by the top management of a middle-

sized French company (2,800 employees) which would like some assistance in developing and implementing their TM strategy. This request led us to carry out a one-year action-research (Coghlan, 2011 ; Eden and Huxham, 1996 ; Lewin, 1946 ; Rapoport, 1970 ; Susman and Evered, 1978) based on a collaborative relationship in order to bring practical solutions to the problem's company, and generate theoretical knowledge on developing process of TM strategy.

This paper proceeds as follows. We posit our research issue into the STM field before explaining the action-research methodology used. We also present our results, and we finally suggest an additional analytical framework of talentship, which can be used during developing TM strategy in order to assess organizational abilities in TM implementation.

## **THEORITICAL BACKGROUND**

The notion of talent is widely debated in TM literature. Despite its theoretical inconstancy mentioned by several works (Al Ariss *et al.*, 2014 ; Cappelli and Keller, 2014 ; Lewis and Heckman, 2006 ; Nijs *et al.*, 2014 ; Vaiman *et al.*, 2012), a decision science of Strategic Talent Management (STM) perspective -such as talentship approach- keeps growing in literature (Collings and Mellahi, 2009 ; Lewis and Heckman, 2006 ; Boudreau and Ramstad, 2004). This paradox needs to be enlightened in order to precise the research issue discussed in this paper.

### **1.1. A theoretical inconstancy related to the notion of talent**

The literature distinguishes two approaches to define 'talent' (Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2012 ; Stahl *et al.*, 2012). One refers to the *person* (talented person) and the other to its *characteristics* (its talents). The first approach based on the person consists of two types of interpretation: an inclusive interpretation which consists in considering everyone as

talented person, and an exclusive interpretation which consists in considering a very small number of people (elite) as talented people. The exclusive interpretation is currently dominant in most works on TM, and talent is therefore recognized as a complex and dynamic amalgam that consists of aptitudes, cognitive abilities, knowledge, skills, potentialities (to grow, to learn, to do, etc.), creativity, performance, leadership, and so on (Tansley, 2011 ; Silzer and Church, 2009b ; Michaels *et al.*, 2001).

Researchers also show the contextual dimension of talent's definition (Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2012 ; Nijs *et al.*, 2014 ; Tansley, 2011). For instance, Tansley (2011) shows that talent's interpretation is mainly related to a gifted-person representation in Europe, and refers to an innate gift expressed in a specific area (sport, art, research, business, etc.), while talent is rather related to an ability which can be acquired and developed into practice in non-European culture –questioning innate or acquired dimension of talent (Meyers *et al.*, 2013 ; Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2012). Furthermore, talent's interpretation differs from the organization type (centralized, transnational or multinational, or small companies) or the organizational and managerial level (Tansley, 2011). According to these reasons, giving universal definition of talent remains impossible (Tansley, 2011 ; Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2012 ; Lewis and Heckman, 2006 ; Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013).

However, clarifying its own philosophical view towards talent is essential (Meyers and van Woerkom, 2014) because that impacts managerial choices do by practitioners in TM implementation (McDonnell, 2011). For instance, an inclusive view leads to implement a single set of practices for every employee, and reinforces a lack of differentiation between TM and traditional HR practices (Lewis and Heckman, 2006). On the contrary, an exclusive view leads to develop a differentiated set of practices which are limited to talented employees. This question between TM and traditional HR management creates debates in TM literature (Lewis and Heckman, 2006).

On the one hand, some authors consider TM as a sophisticated costume of traditional HR practices (Chuai *et al.*, 2008). On the other hand, the others emphasize innovative state of mind of TM which is based on recognition that talent is the key of organizational competitiveness (Cappelli, 2008). In that case, TM is therefore defined as ‘activities and processes that involve the systematic identification of key positions which differentially contribute to the organization’s sustainable competitive advantage, the development of a talent pool of high potential and high performing incumbents to fill these roles, and the development of a differentiated human resource architecture to facilitate filling these positions with competent incumbents and to ensure their continued commitment to the organization’ (Collings and Mellahi, 2009, p. 304).

This well-accepted definition outlines the strategic dimension of TM related to an identification of key roles and positions within the organization. This perspective leads to discriminate strategic and non-strategic roles in order to implement differentiated HR practices (Al Ariss *et al.*, 2014) : traditional HR practices in managing non-strategic jobs and skills, and TM in managing strategic positions and talented people. STM also depends on a set of process (attraction, selection, development and retention) developed in order to anticipate needs for talent in strategic positions (Cappelli and Keller, 2014 ; Vaiman *et al.*, 2012).

## **1.2. A decision science in development for talent management**

Therefore, in that perspective, TM is defined as a distinctive strategic activity from traditional HR management, which consists in paying great attention to the employees and positions with a differential impact on organizational strategy. The question consists in identifying organizational roles with the most strategic contribution in order to define the best allocation processes to fill in these roles by adequate talents. In that vein, STM

proposes a specific HR architecture focused on high-performance and/or high-potential employees who will have to fill in these organizational key positions according to the organizational strategy (Collings and Mellahi, 2009 ; Silzer and Church, 2009a ; Lewis and Heckman, 2006).

The ‘talentship’ perspective by Boudreau et Ramstad (2004, 2007) aims to contribute to STM objectives by improving decision-making process in TM architecture building. It is organized around three analysis levels (Lewis and Heckman, 2006): the organizational segmentation by talent pools, i.e. discriminating pools of talent according to their organizational strategic impact; the effectiveness of TM practices (training, coaching, etc.) related to a talent pool, i.e. measuring expected quality impact of TM/HR practices in terms of talented employees’ behaviors (according to the pool); and, the effectiveness of TM policy, i.e. measuring TM return on investment. In that perspective, TM architecture becomes a multi-storey building (Lewis and Heckman, 2006) which results from, for policy makers eager to implement TM, a set of decisions related to:

- First, the strategy being able to offer a sustainable competitive advantage to the organization according to its external and internal environment. That strategic reflection leads to define both the ‘A positions’ within the company (Huselid *et al.*, 2005), i.e. organizational positions with a strategic impact and a competitive advantage due to its creation of value-adding according to the business model<sup>1</sup>, and the segmentation by ‘pools’ of ‘pivotal talents’.
- The TM strategy being able to determine and allocate resources in line with organizational needs (McDonnell, 2011). That consists in differentiating and distributing every pool of talent according to their strategic dimension, determining necessary combinations for the organization between ‘A, B and C

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<sup>1</sup> ‘B positions’ are positions (jobs, roles) with strategic impact but few competitive advantage, and ‘C positions’ have few strategic impact and competitive advantage.

performers' (who held A, B and C positions), and defining more or less specific practices associated with each pool (in terms of compensation, career, etc.).

- Finally, the TM systems (HR politics, HR Information System, etc.) and practices (selection, recruitment, training, development, etc.) being able to achieve STM objectives. Cappelli (2008) suggests in that perspective a just-in-time TM model inspired by supply chain management.

### **1.3. The development process of TM strategy**

Talentship also represents a decisional model really useful for policy makers. It facilitates their making-decision process by providing guidelines for TM implementation. But, in the same time, these guidelines tend to reify TM process, i.e. it sounds like an 'end product' with high efficiency that strictly depends on respect of talentship guidelines. In this paper, we would like to question this visible consistency by exploring *the developing process of TM strategy* which is carried out by one or more policy makers. To our knowledge, no study investigates this process, while it represents a crucial moment where policy makers decide to implement or not TM strategy, and define how TM strategy could be implemented. It is a moment where everything is possible, but where nothing is defined, i.e. a period where success and failure of TM implementation do not choose sides.

Everything depends on what happens during the developing process of TM strategy. This process brings together policy makers with their own perceptions, representations, or imaginations about TM strategy's project and the notion of talent (Tansley, 2011 ; Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2012 ; Lewis and Heckman, 2006 ; Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, the developing process of TM strategy opens an organizational space of confrontations between policy makers, and puts into question the previous organizational balance. Because of policy makers are human being, rationality and irrationality may



intervene into the developing process of TM strategy. Vaiman and al. (2012) also show that making-decisions are often made by actors without well-structured framework, without absolute consideration of relevant and key data, and most of the time biased by their personal preferences, instincts or cognitive choices.

This paper aims to investigate this developing process of TM strategy within a specific cultural and organizational context. It seeks to understand factors which intervene in that process, and evaluate the supposed abilities of any organization to implement TM strategy. In that perspective, strategy, structure, culture, execution, leadership or innovation are not merely considered as *a posteriori* factors which contribute to TM effectiveness (Joyce and Slocum, 2012), but *a priori* factors which determine organizational relevance in terms of implementation of TM strategy. Therefore, this investigation can contribute to better understand necessary conditions for a successful developing TM strategy (Joyce and Slocum, 2012) by enlightening situational and individual factors which influence this process, and answering to the following research question: **what are the organizational contingency's factors involved into the developing process of TM strategy?**

Because of emerging nature of this theoretical perspective, we used an inductive and exploratory research method. The research was initiated by the top management of a middle-sized French company (2,800 employees) which would like some assistance in developing and implementing their TM strategy. This request led us to carry out a one-year action-research (Coghlan, 2011 ; Eden and Huxham, 1996 ; Lewin, 1946 ; Rapoport, 1970 ; Susman and Evered, 1978) based on a collaborative relationship in order to bring practical solutions to the problem's company, and generate theoretical knowledge on developing process of TM strategy.

## **METHOD**

An action-research method is based on a collaborative relationship between the researcher and its client in order to solve a practical issue (Rapoport, 1970 ; Coghlan, 2011). This method contributes to be immersed into the studied phenomenon, as it is requested by our research issue. This section aims to demonstrate the scientific legitimacy of our approach (Brydon-Miller *et al.*, 2003 ; Coghlan, 2011 ; Stringer, 2007 ; Eden and Huxham, 1996) by presenting the company and its organizational context, the action-research process defined with our client, and the evolution of our methodological framework in time.

### **2.1. The company and its environment**

The organization is a French middle-sized company (2,800 employees) operating in the building supplies sector. Created in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the family who founded the group ensured the governance until 1990's. At that time, the governance model changed for a new one that consists of two governance instances: a supervisory board bringing together several generations of the founder family (main shareholders), and a management board of seven top-managers managed by a CEO (who does not belong to the founder family). This company is also characterized by a singular identity related to its territory, the Vendée (west coast of France).

This identity is defined by a strong proximity between employers and employees which is grounded in a socio-cultural mechanism inherited from the past relationship between lords (*châtelains* in French) and peasants (Raveleau, 1998 ; Champain *et al.*, 1985). These last fifty years, as well as the past peasantry, the vendéen industrial system of small and middle-sized companies has been structuring around some 'familial owners' (Raveleau, 1998), i.e. big and well-known familial vendéenne companies such as Fleury Michon, Sodebo, Gautier Meubles or Bénéteau. Nowadays, employment relationship in Vendée is

characterized by what that characterized the past relationship between lords and peasants, i.e. a respectful patronage, a strong religious culture and a sense of responsibility towards employees (Champain *et al.*, 1985). By consequence, the company of our study is imbued with these aspects which explain its permanent assertion concerning its values of proximity, simplicity and humanity.

From a structural point of view, the company consists of a headquarter (support functions, 135 employees) and three business units (2,350 employees) which are consisted of autonomous agencies, factories or centrals mixing plant:

- The trading of building material (1,230 employees) represents the historical activity of the company, and the most important turnover in 2011. This business unit consists of agencies and shops mainly distributed on the France west coast (with some in French DOM-TOM, 215 employees), and is marked by a strong corporate culture with an oral tradition / habit. This activity meets a problem of cost efficiency in terms of gross margin (sale and purchase of material) and sales force's organization.
- The mixing plant (180 employees) consists of centrals mixing plant distributed on the France west coast. This business unit is highly capital intensive and lowly value added because of a lack of synergy with the trading activity and a territorial coverage which involves important transport costs due to the distance between centrals and clients.
- The carpentry activity (1240 employees) is the earliest activity of the company and has a headquarter located in Bretagne (north-west of France) which nurtures holding-company relationship with the group headquarter. This business unit consists of a dozen production factories in France (940 employees) and two in North America (300 employees), which are imbued with an industrial culture, i.e.

marked by written rules, formalization and industrialization/rationalization. The main issue of this activity consists in service quality and delivery times.

The company has undergone in-depth change over the last few decades. It knew a fast economic expansion (15% per year for 2 years) which led, for endogenous and exogenous reasons, to the threefold growth in employee numbers over a period of 20 years (800 employees in 1992 compared to 2,800 employees in 2012). Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, the company knew an evolution of its corporate governance that moved from a familial model to a shareholder model (with high management constraints) and from a familial management to a non-familial management by a top-manager team that faces to a challenge of its own succession planning for the next five to ten years. Finally, all these evolutions and the openness to a process of internationalization (China in 2008, North America in 2011), have led to put into question the company and its balance in terms of structure, culture, management and value/identity.

Therefore, in that deep-change context, the question of talent required to face to these challenges emerges. The risks perceived by company in case of lack of talent management are: a dilution of original values that company wants to continue to support; a managerial distance between employees and top-managers (due to the size effect and group internationalization, and despite managerial staff reinforcement with 250 middle managers) that puts into question values of proximity and simplicity which are at the heart of the company identity; and, a strategic discontinuity in the medium and long term because of a lack of 'home talents' trained by current top-managers.

## **2.2. The action-research framework**

The top-manager team carried out a work on talent by identifying key jobs and key people. They identified 230 key people, out of a population of 350 managers. Because of

difficulties met by them in data collection and analysis, the CEO and Human Resources Director (HRD) stopped this work and asked for some assistance in developing and implementing their TM strategy. The request consisted in ‘accompanying management board for one year in its reflection on TM and implementation of adapted actions’. Therefore, because of the theoretical and practical sides of this request, we adopted an action-research methodology which both enabled us to satisfy our client and contribute to develop new theoretical knowledge in terms of development of TM strategy (Eden and Huxham, 1996 ; Coghlan, 2011 ; Rapoport, 1970). In June 2011, we concluded a one-year contract with the company, which defined the methodological framework, financial and logistical modalities, and reciprocal expectations and engagements between our client and us (and our institution).

The research protocol was built on alternative cycles between (1) reflection on talent and TM, and (2) action in terms of implementation of practical and specific organizational solutions (Lewin, 1946 ; Greenwood, 2007 ; Susman and Evered, 1978). Participation of every actor associated to the action-research process was specified (Lewin, 1946 ; Reason and Bradbury, 2001 ; Roy and Prévost, 2013), and led us to distinguish ‘makers-actors’ (members of management board) and ‘contributors-actors’ (middle managers). By consequence, because of we were involved with them into a dialogical process of developing of TM strategy, members of management board represented genuine co-researchers (Coghlan, 2011). Among them, HRD played an additional role by acting as go-between management board / CEO and us, in order to manage individual and political challenges inevitably activated by the research.

We adopted a double stance towards our client, because we were either a researcher or a consultant into the action-research process (Eden and Huxham, 1996 ; Susman and Evered, 1978). For the management board, our legitimacy and ability to accompany them were

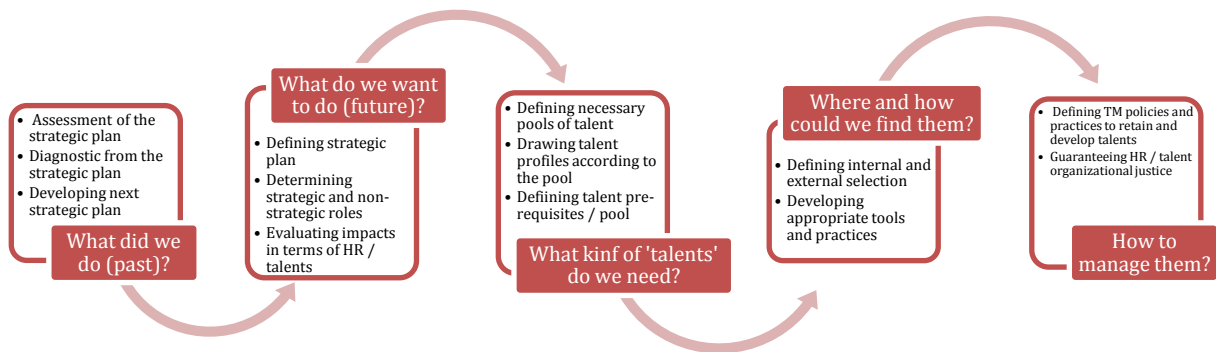
related to our personal occupational experience as HR consulting manager and our current position at Audencia as researcher in HR and management. This professional background trusted them in going back and forth between theory and practice all along our collaboration. We kept a research activity diary in order to outline, among other things, these iterative cycles between theory and practice, and the nature of our and their participation into the process.

Before working with the management board, we consulted and analyzed documentation addressed by the company, i.e. the strategic plan for the last three years, the social report, the social climate survey, the organization chart, and so on. This work contributed to our better understanding of organizational context before exchanging with each member of management board, in June 2011, during an individual semi-directive interview lasting from one to two hours. These eight interviews, voice-recorded and transcribed integrally, consisted in listening to the individual view on talent and developing TM strategy (Stringer, 2007) in order to (1) evaluate the individual degree of information and adherence to the process, (2) collect their respective view on talent from concrete examples of employees they considered as talented (by defining their number, characteristics and differences with highly-skilled employees), and (3) exchange on the TM strategy process (and its modalities).

The data collection led to data analysis in July 2011 which consisted in building a comparative grid of their view on talent and TM strategy process, and identifying differences and resistances within the management board (toward the project and/or colleagues). The analysis was presented to the management board during a three-hour collective meeting (in August 2011), in order to (1) share our understanding of organization, its context and challenges; (2) compare theoretical approaches on talent (mentioned in literature review) with their individual views; and (3) prepare the ground for

the basis of a common vision on TM within the company by defining a set of modalities in terms of phases (figure 1) and related actions, reflections and timelines.

Figure 1.Steps of action-research for developing a TM strategy



We collectively validated these modalities at this meeting. Each member of management board accepted to think, clarify and write a proposition of strategic plan related to the strategy of the group and their respective business unit. This should contribute to nurture the company's strategic plan written by the management board during their seminar at the end of August 2011. Therefore, we should align TM strategy to this strategic plan during the next action-research session scheduled in September or October 2011.

### 2.3. A continuously on-going and iterative process

At that time, the organizational situation changed because of degraded business-cycle indicators, and questioning of previous organizational balance caused by action-research. The economic degradation put pressure on members of management board, who perceived an urgency which affected in-depth the emerging process of TM strategy's developing. By consequence, we inevitably took distance from the initial action-research framework, and, thanks to our immersion into this process and our qualitative and longitudinal data collection of individual experiences (Eden and Huxham, 1996), were able to observe antagonistic factors to the developing process of TM strategy and subjective dynamic related to it (Al Ariss *et al.*, 2014).

First of all, because of ‘makers-actors’ focused on short term and were not able to define their strategic view in the medium and long term, we concluded with the CEO and HRD to work on this strategic issue. With a colleague in strategy, we carried out a second set of interviews with each member of management board. These individual interviews, lasting one hour, voice-recorded and transcribed integrally, were focused on their strategic view in medium and long term for the group and their business unit. After a data analysis complemented by an analysis of previous group and business unit’s strategic plan, we organized a preparatory meeting with the CEO, HRD and our colleague, in order to define and validate the organization and modalities of management board’s feedback meeting in October 2011.

After recalling this meeting represented the basis for developing process of TM strategy, the morning session consisted in a strategic thinking from a pooling of strategic plan (prepared by everyone), and was followed by a presentation of our ‘discovery report’ and some methodological contributions for building a strategic plan in order to nurture the afternoon session. This last session consisted in defining strategic orientation, translating it from an economic way, and exploring consequential actions in terms of TM strategy. Nevertheless, despite our support, the inexorable degradation of economic situation exacerbated tensions within management board and led to their inability to share a common strategic view for the future (Coghlan, 2011). These difficulties increased in January 2012 after the annual meeting with the supervisory board, which put under pressure the CEO and his team due to the economic and financial results’ degradation.

Therefore, we had to leave time for the CEO and his team to clarify their strategic position (also required by the supervisory board). However, in order to avoid risk associated with failure of action-research that we perceived with the HRD, and in order to nurture their strategic reflection, we proposed and get the possibility to involve middle managers (the



target population of TM strategy). We carried out a multi-methodological approach from February to May 2012 (4 focus-group, each of which lasted about three hours, and 35 individual semi-directive interviews lasting from one to two hours) enabling data triangulation for interpretation (Eden and Huxham, 1996).

We presented a final analysis to the management board in June 2012 during a three-hour meeting. We aimed to (1) outline the future importance of this issue according to the results and testimonies collected during our participations at international conferences (academic and professional); (2) bring keys of understanding on success or failure factors of TM strategy; (3) present our results in terms of middle managers' view on company (culture, identity, organization and functioning, structure, market, strategy, management board, future challenges); and finally (4) make concrete recommendations to build and implement their future TM strategy.

The next section mainly presents factors which led to this failure in the developing process of TM strategy -and by consequence, in TM implementation- in order to discuss later, from this specific context, a set of reflections and complementary suggestions for talentship model.

## **FINDINGS**

We quickly observed an inability for management board to outline an organizational strategy for future related to different contingency factors. Our immersion into this developing process of TM strategy led us to observe that their inability was associated with a lack of anticipation of environmental evolutions met by the French building sector. These evolutions consist in introduction of new construction laws more environmentally friendly (e.g. BBC norms, RT 2012 norm, etc.) which affect production and commercialization of construction products. They are also related to high concentration of construction actors

which leads to review the business approach due to emergence of new policy makers and prescribers in construction market's allocation (e.g. architects), and which scrambles competition readability.

‘Tomorrow, we know there will have new consumption modes, new building modes with new distribution channels, but we do as if it does not exist and we do not anticipate...’ (a member of management board)

These environmental evolutions directly impact on organizational jobs, skills and talents needed in the future. In the same time, consumers move from a profile of ‘craftsman-handyman’ stuck to its brand and store, to a ‘technician-manager’s profile more expert in product knowledge, more demanding in terms of services, and more volatile with providers than before. Furthermore, the management board did not anticipate technological phenomenon (e.g. Smartphones, social media, etc.) which revolutionize traditional marketing processes by giving to consumers means for comparing and finding the best product at the best price.

‘The thing that shocks me the most is that we are afraid by internet. We always consider our client approach in the same way, like three or five years ago... But the world has changed and now we have to integrate new technologies within our commercial approach, but when we talk about internet or social media and so on... wow, that are dirty words!’ (a middle manager)

The environmental context therefore appears as complex and unreadable for them. They are unable to outline a strategy within an unpredictable context: on the one hand, they did not anticipate the importance of strategic innovation in order to create differentiation due to offer's saturation or highly-demanding and infidel consumers, and, on the other hand, the primacy of marketing dimension in order to succeed in the current hyper-competition context related to new competitive landscape of construction sector and new construction products more ‘global’. Technical and behavioral sale's skills cannot be the same in that context. Nowadays, trading function needs employees able to have a widely knowledge of

the construction system where the product they sell is encompassed (not only a product knowledge), and to provide appropriated advice with the aim of attracting and retaining their clients.

‘We do not merely sell a gypsum plasterboard, we sell a house, i.e. a building system which combine different products together in order to achieve a determined energetic performance’ (a member of management board)

Despite the strategic session dedicated to solve management board’s inability to determine the strategy providing a sustainable competitive advantage, the developing process of TM strategy did not go beyond the first step of talentship. Due to their inability to define their organizational view for the future, they were unable to determine their organizational strategy and by consequence strategic roles they will need for the future. This sticking point put into question the following step that consisted in defining ‘A positions’ and associated pools of pivotal talents. However, this strategic breakdown cannot merely be the consequence of environmental factors.

‘Everyone knows that our jobs changed and this is inescapable, and people who will come in 5 or 10 years are people who will have an apprehension about new technologies that our boss [management board] do not have’ (a middle manager)

Indeed, we find an historical factor to explain it and, therefore, to explain failure in developing process of TM strategy. Due to the economic crisis in 2009, while its major competitors chose a downsizing strategy of their activities, the management board preferred to maintain employment in the name of their humanistic and social responsibility’s values –reinforced by vendéenne identity. This strategic decision represents *a posteriori* for the management board, the first bad strategic choice for over 15 years. This choice led to maintain an inadequate organizational configuration in terms of human resources needed, and an indirect impact on the collective dynamic of the workforce by

creating a diffuse feeling of insecurity in job, a decline in involvement and initiatives taken by employees.

‘I have the impression that each service is focused on itself and lives in an autonomous way (... ) every activity lives in its own world...’ (a middle manager)

Therefore, in two years, a lack of strategic trust has progressively contaminated the management board, and was reinforced during the action-research by four intra-organizational crises met by the company:

- A classical ‘growth crisis’ due to organization-size effect and group’s diversification which leads the management board to question priority choices in terms of investments and organizational structuring, i.e. maintaining current organization as a constellation of SME or designing a structure that improves synergies between activities.
- A ‘cultural crisis’ related to a movement from a SME culture to a corporate culture, from a commercial culture (supported by trading activity and based on oral culture) to an industrial culture (supported by carpentry activity and based on written culture), and from a local culture (region of Vendée) to an international culture (with acquisitions in China and North America) -which raises questions about multi-local management and relevance of creating an international direction.
- A ‘structure crisis’ due to atomization of organization which is characterized by a segmentation of its activities putting into question the diffusion of ‘talent spirit’
- A ‘managerial crisis’ related to practices’ heterogeneity according to activities, jobs, entities and managers, but also related to the succession issue of management board (which is perceived by employees as divided)

‘The working atmosphere within the management board is not the same than before, and I have been working a lot with them for these 11 or 12 last years’ (a middle manager)

By the way, these tensions between members of management board were a major factor to explain difficulties met by them in developing process of TM strategy. All along the action-research, we observed a disunity of management board, more or less latent interpersonal conflicts leading the CEO and the Director of trading activity to leave the company few months after the research. At the outset of our intervention, strong differences, mainly focused on strategy (even if every topic could be an issue), emerged between the CEO and its team, and most of the time, led to scathing criticism of his leadership.

‘We are stuck in the fog, and the problem is that we feel him [CEO] into the blur about what we exactly want for the future. He always remains very vague because he lost his vision for the future’ (a member of management board)

Finally, this disunity of the management board explains that actors were not able to create a common view on talent at the beginning of the action-research, i.e. to be able to build a common view and language about notion of talent by accepting the other’s point of view. If some considered talent as something which depends on the professional context, others related it to individual intrinsic abilities. Therefore, in spite of theoretical and practical work we did with them, and because of they were never able to clarify their strategy, the notion of talent remained tenuous for actors (i.e. undifferentiated from notions as potential, key-people or highly-qualified person), abstract because of defined in spirit (i.e. something which is undefined but perceived as something that someone has in addition from others, a wow factor), variable due to the scope which is considered (i.e. a function, a job, a geographic region, etc.), and static because of their inability to see talent into a dynamic perspective.

This section also presents some antagonistic factors in this specific developing process of TM strategy, such as inability to enunciate a strategy for future, a lack of trust in

developing strategy due to previous / historical strategic mistakes, a lack of anticipation about market evolutions (norms, competition, new tools, new policy makers and prescribers, etc.), a crisis time (of growth, culture, structure, managerial and leadership), or a disunity of team that wants to implement TM strategy. Therefore, it seems *ex post* that this call for talent represented a kind of magical incantation, and hid organizational dysfunctions revealed by action-research which are counter-productive for an effective developing process of TM strategy.

## **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

These findings need to be restored into their singularity, i.e. related to a specific organization, within a singular environmental context, involving singular actors with their own singularity. Even if this singularity does not enable us to generalize our findings, we nevertheless consider these findings as potential insights inviting to clarify some current unknown aspects in TM literature (Al Ariss *et al.*, 2014), such as organizational factors involved into the developing process of TM strategy, or integration of organizational abilities which are required in talentship approach in order to implement TM strategy (Collings and Mellahi, 2009 ; Lewis and Heckman, 2006).

Our results outline some literature conclusions, such as contingency of talent and impossible universal definition of talent (Gallardo-Gallardo *et al.*, 2012 ; Nijs *et al.*, 2014 ; Tansley, 2011). However, we take some distance from a supposed shared-definition of talent between stakeholders within an organization (Al Ariss *et al.*, 2014). There are cognitive aspects which participate in talent's interpretation of individual involved into the making decision on TM strategy (Vaiman *et al.*, 2012), but also subjective, emotional and affective aspects related to their personal history, convictions or, longings and personal challenges.

Therefore, it could be interesting to consider individual subjectivity in developing process of TM strategy, i.e. considering intrinsic motivation's keys of TM strategy, and how the developing process of TM strategy is impacted by them. For instance, beyond a call for talent, our findings suggest a kind of fantasy nurtured by the CEO. The request he addressed to us (to be helped in developing TM strategy) seems to be *a posteriori* governed by a more or less conscious longing of his own personal fulfillment, i.e. a need of social recognition *vis-à-vis* regional CEOs consisting in being considered as a CEO of an international group with its own TM system (as every international group) rather than a decision grounded in rational and objective motivations integrating organizational capabilities in TM implementation. According to us, this figure of talent as 'organizational savior' merits further study in order to enlighten both imaginary mechanisms and subjective challenges nurtured by individual and groups about TM strategy.

Our results also suggest that an exclusive strategic TM alignment (McDonnell, 2011 ; Lewis and Heckman, 2006 ; Collings and Mellahi, 2009 ; Vaiman *et al.*, 2012 ; Boudreau and Ramstad, 2004) is not sufficient to ensure TM implementation's success. This case inductively suggests that success also depends on TM alignment on (1) an organizational structure that encourages talent's fulfillment by opportunities of mobility (not a compartmentalized one); (2) an organizational culture that nurtures talent spirit beyond functional, sectorial or geographical boundaries (not a multicultural one); and (3) a coherent community of managerial practices and leadership that improves talent's fulfillment thank to collaborative works, decentralization of power and responsibilities. Future studies could investigate in-depth these different dimensions in TM strategy alignment in order to assess more precisely the pre-requested dimensions guarantying TM implementation success.

In other terms, this perspective leads to investigate organizational capabilities (Joyce and Slocum, 2012) for TM strategy. That not only consists in assessing *a posteriori* influence of organizational capabilities on TM performance, but assessing *a priori* their influence on TM strategy's viability during the developing process. On the one hand, this action-research illustrates that every organization is not necessarily well-equipped for TM strategy, and, on the other hand, that a preliminary diagnostic on organizational capabilities for TM strategy could help practitioners in identifying organizational strengths and weaknesses for TM implementation. Future research focused on TM organizational prerequisites could improve practical and theoretical understanding on TM implementation's successful conditions.

This discussion leads us to suggest a new avenue of research in talentship (Boudreau and Ramstad, 2004 ; Cappelli, 2008 ; Cappelli and Keller, 2014 ; Lewis and Heckman, 2006) that consists in a new level of preliminary reflections in order to anticipate organizational prerequisites for launching TM strategy. These reflections consist of a set of questions organized around five independent and additional analysis levels:

- The strategic level: beyond the necessity of clarifying and enunciating organizational strategy and strategic plans, actors have to assess (1) alignment of leaders on organizational strategy, (2) understanding of this strategic view by every organizational stakeholder, and (3) conformity of organizational functioning to these strategic principles.
- The structure level: it is associated with assessment of organizational structure in order to (1) determine organizational capability in providing opportunities in terms of professional mobility and/or skill's transferability, (2) release and improve synergies between activities, services and functions in terms of TM process and practices, (3) identify and anticipate eventual talent's shortages in a skill, market



and timeline point of view, according to strategic choices for the future, and (4) know how efficiently manage change within the organization.

- The culture level: policy makers have to (1) assess potential ability of their organization in promoting and spreading ‘talent spirit’ (Cappelli, 2008) beyond geographical and functional boundaries, and (2) guarantee the congruence between their behaviors and values they promote and want to promote.
- The leadership level: policy makers have to be able to (1) assess and guarantee their cohesiveness and involvement in TM strategy, (2) share a common interpretation on what talent means in their singular organization, and (3) support and spread ‘talent spirit’ into their own activities.
- The management level: policy makers have to assess (1) potential heterogeneity of existing practices which can impact TM efficiency; (2) adhesion of middle managers to organizational interpretation on talent; (3) ability and maturity of middle managers in TM implementation; and, (4) collective understanding of intergenerational and intercultural dynamics of talent.

These elements represent five dimensions of preliminary diagnostic on organizational capabilities in TM implementation. According to us, this exploratory proposition on organizational prerequisites for TM could provide an additional analysis framework to talentship in order to help practitioners in decision making during developing process of TM strategy.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper aims to propose an emergent reflection on developing process of TM strategy that is currently unrecognized in TM literature. It explores some organizational contingencies into this process by a one-year action-research carried out with a middle-

sized company within a non Anglo-Saxon context (Chuai *et al.*, 2008 ; Collings *et al.*, 2009 ; Mellahi and Collings, 2010). Our findings lead us to minimize two main STM presuppositions: a supposed exclusivity of TM alignment on organizational strategy, and a supposed capability for every organization in TM implementation (Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013).

Our study shows that beyond a necessary strategic clarification mentioned by STM literature, several factors intervene into developing process of TM strategy: nature of past strategic decisions, internal (structure, culture, leadership, management, etc.) and external (society, market, technology, etc.) environmental factors, organizational history, or individual longings and ambitions. However, due to its exploratory nature, this perspective needs to be supplemented with future studies in order to examine in-depth the influence of these organizational factors and individual / collective subjectivity in developing process of TM strategy (Al Ariss *et al.*, 2014), and check the validity and the potential generalization of these results to other organizational contexts (Stahl *et al.*, 2012 ; Al Ariss *et al.*, 2014).

These studies could enrich academic and professional knowledge on organizational capabilities or conditions (Joyce and Slocum, 2012) required for implementation successful TM strategy. They could contribute to build a new level of talentship reflections (Boudreau and Ramstad, 2004 ; Cappelli, 2008 ; Cappelli and Keller, 2014 ; Lewis and Heckman, 2006) providing a preliminary diagnostic on organizational capabilities in TM implementation. This tool could benefit to policy makers in order to guard them against a ‘managerial fashion for talent’ for which they and their organization are not really equipped.

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